

THE STURGIS WAGER

A DETECTIVE STORY.

By EDGAR MORETTE

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CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EXTENSION.

A few minutes later Sturgis, apparently absorbed in the contemplation of the paintings which hung in the hall, heard the door of Murdock's study open softly. Although the reporter did not turn his head, he at once became conscious that the chemist's piercing eyes were fixed upon him. The observation lasted so long that Sturgis, self-possessed as was his wont, was beginning to feel a trifle nervous, when at last Dr. Murdock broke the silence:

"I have to apologize for leaving you standing in the hall, Mr. Sturgis. I was under the impression that I had invited you to step into the parlor."

The words, courteous in themselves, conveyed to the hearer an impression of biting sarcasm.

"I found the parlor already occupied; I hesitated to disturb a tete-a-tete," replied Sturgis, quietly.

Murdock eyed him narrowly for a moment, and then invited him into the study.

The chemist's study was a spacious room, plainly but luxuriously furnished, and containing every convenience and comfort calculated to lighten the labor of a busy man. The table, littered with books and papers, stood near a small safe and almost directly opposite the hall door. Speaking-tubes and electric call buttons were within reach of the occupant of the easy chair, and probably placed him in communication with the various portions of the household; while a telephone on one side and a typewriter on the other showed that the chemist kept in touch also with the outside world.

Murdock's interlocutor, whoever he had been, had disappeared. But how? The question interested Sturgis, and his mind at once began to seek an answer to it.

There were three doors leading from the study. One of these was the one by which Murdock and Sturgis had just entered from the hall. No one could have passed out that way without meeting them.

Then there were the folding doors leading into the library; but, as the door leading from the library to the hall had remained slightly ajar, Sturgis felt sure that he would have heard the man had he gone out by that way.

The third door led to a small extension. He must have gone into the extension," thought Sturgis.

The only alternative was an exit through the windows. This in itself would not have presented any special difficulty; for the distance to the flagging below was hardly more than 12 or 13 feet. But the yard, which was of diminutive size on account of the space allotted to the garden on the street, was inclosed by an unusually high fence, protected by a row of sharp and closely set spikes. These looked so formidable that the thought of anyone attempting to scale the fence instantly suggested visions of impaled wretches writhing in oriental tortures. The only possible exit from the yard, therefore, seemed to be through the basement; that is to say, past the kitchen and the servants' department.

All these thoughts flashed through the reporter's brain in a small fraction of the time which is required to record them. They occurred to him unbidden, while his conscious efforts were centered upon discovering how Chatham had managed to escape from the rear of the Manhattan Chemical company's building.

This Sturgis recognized without much difficulty. It was directly in line with the house in which he now was, and its yard did not differ from the neighboring ones, the fences of which could be scaled without much trouble. Chatham evidently might have passed into any one of several buildings which lacked the protection of the formidable spikes that so effectively guarded the approach to Murdock's house from the rear.

One point, however, was puzzling. Why should Chatham take the trouble and the risk of scaling fences in broad daylight, only to return a few hours later by the street door under the very noses of the detectives from whom he had presumably wished to escape? There seemed to be no plausible answer to this question.

But Sturgis was not given much time in which to consider it; for Murdock, who had waited for him to broach the subject of his interview, now coldly remarked:

"Perhaps, Mr. Sturgis, you will be good enough to inform me to what I owe the honor of this visit?"

Sturgis took as a pretext the first subject which came into his mind. "Doctor," said he, "I have been told that you were engaged in a series of brilliant chemical researches; that you had proved, or were on the point of proving, that several, at least, of the so-called elementary metals are compounds; thus ushering in the realization of the dream of the alchemists—the transmutation of metals."

"You have not come here to interview me on the subject of my chemical researches?" laughed Murdock.

"Why not?"

"Because I gave you credit for possessing the scientific spirit. A man spends years in making a series of exhaustive experiments, and refrains from advancing any theory until he has built up an elaborate monument of solid facts; and you ask him to make a premature report, to be spread broad-

cast in a sensational sheet, with all the embellishments which an unbridled reportorial imagination can add to it. No, sir, my report, when it is ready, will be made through the proper channels. I am surprised that one who passes for a man of science should be willing to make such a request."

If Murdock intended to gail the reporter, he succeeded; for, modest as he was, Sturgis prided himself above all things upon the scientific value of his work in all its aspects. He manifested no external sign of annoyance, however, as he answered, with a smile:

"I am not a man of science now, but only a reporter."

"In that case," replied Murdock, "let us talk of something else. I should be pleased to discuss my chemical researches with Mr. Sturgis, the scientist; but with Mr. Sturgis, the reporter, I should prefer to talk about something in his line of knowledge; let me see, shall we say the Knickerbocker bank mystery, for instance?"

The reporter's ear detected the venomous sarcasm to which he was now accustomed from this strange man. He raised his eyes to those of the chemist, and for the space of a few seconds the two men looked steadily into each other's souls.

Then a sudden light flashed across Sturgis' brain, and he started perceptibly. At the same time he thought he saw a shadow cross Murdock's impassive features; but in this he might have been mistaken, for when he looked again the chemist was regarding him with an air of mild curiosity.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Sturgis?" he asked.

"Only a sudden thought," carelessly replied Sturgis, who to all appearances had completely recovered from the momentary shock produced by the suddenness of the suspicion which had crossed his mind. "Your mention of the Knickerbocker bank mystery reminded me of something that is all."

"Ever since Sprague's dinner," said Murdock, "I have been devoting all my spare time to the reading of the Times, in the hope of finding there a sensational account, with glaring headlines, of the brilliant work of our distinguished reporter, Mr. Sturgis."

Sturgis made no reply. His eyes were fixed upon the typewriter which stood near Murdock's desk.

"Up to the present time," continued Murdock, "I have not seen anything to cause me to worry about my stakes."

"I have still 25 days in which to complete my case," said Sturgis.

"True," replied Murdock. "Well, I wish you luck. If I can render you any assistance in your investigations I hope you will call upon me. In the cause of science I would willingly jeopardize my stakes. For instance, if you need to consult any works of reference, my library is at your disposal. I am told that, at least on the subjects in which you are interested, it is quite complete."

He observed the reporter narrowly, as if to mark the effect of his words. "It is," replied Sturgis, after an almost imperceptible hesitation; "I have already admired it."

"Indeed?" said Murdock, arching his brows in mild surprise.

"Yes; I stepped into the library for a few minutes while I was waiting for you."

"Ah! yes; I see." Murdock gave the reporter another searching look. Then he bent back in his easy chair with half-closed eyes and silently pulled away at his cigar for a few minutes.

Had Sturgis been able to read the sinister thoughts which were passing through the mind of this impressive man as he sat apparently in lazy enjoyment of his fragrant Havana, it is probable that he might have just some of the interest which he seemed suddenly to have developed in the typewriter. But he was busy with his own train of thought, and therefore was not paying any particular attention to Murdock.

Presently the chemist spoke again: "On second thoughts, Mr. Sturgis, if you will step into my laboratory I shall be pleased to show you those of the results of my recent researches which are ready for publication."

The reporter was surprised at this sudden change of front, and perhaps a trifle suspicious, for he was beginning to yield together many hitherto isolated facts into a strong chain which was leading him from the Knickerbocker bank and Chatham, through the Manhattan Chemical company, to the enigmatical man in whose presence he now stood. Some important links were missing, however, and Sturgis could not afford to lose any chance of making the chain complete.

He therefore accepted Murdock's invitation, in the hope of making some

"Very well," said Murdock; "wait for me just one minute while I open the ventilators of the laboratory. It becomes pretty close in there when the place has been shut up for some time."

So saying, Murdock turned a crank which projected from the wall. A grating sound was heard, as of the rasping of metal upon metal. Then he returned to his desk, where he busied himself for a few minutes under pretext of looking for some notes of his experiments. When apparently he had found what he was seeking he went toward the door of the extension. This was of massive hard wood. Before turning the knob, the chemist stooped as though to examine the lower hinge. Sturgis was not consciously following Murdock's movements. His mind was bent upon accomplishing a certain object; and with that end in view, he was gradually drawing nearer to the typewriter. But so accustomed was he to receiving detailed impressions of all that occurred before his eyes, that the chemist's actions, unimportant as they seemed at the time, were unconsciously recorded upon the reporter's brain.

Murdock opened the door of the extension and passed out of the room. Sturgis, watching his chance, snatched up a sheet of paper from the table, inserted it in the typewriter and rattled off something as fast as he could. Looking up when he had finished he saw that Murdock had returned and was observing him with a sardonic grin.

"More happy thoughts?" he inquired.

"Yes," answered Sturgis, calmly folding the paper and slipping it into the pocket of his coat.

Murdock chuckled to himself, as if enjoying a quiet joke.

"Well," said he, "if you will do me the honor, we can step down into the laboratory."

Sturgis nodded and went toward the door which Murdock held open. As he passed the chemist the reporter caught his eye and, in a flash, read there some sinister purpose, which caused him to hesitate, on his guard.

At that moment there came a knock upon the hall door.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Murdock, "here comes an interruption, I suppose. Please step downstairs; I shall be with you directly."

With these words he quietly but firmly shoved the reporter into the extension and, with a rapid motion, pushed forward the door.

Sturgis almost lost his balance, but instinctively put out his foot between the door and the jamb. He felt a strong pressure from the outside, but he knew he was master of the situation and patiently bided his time. Presently the pressure ceased and he was able to open the door.

Murdock wore an air of pained surprise. "What is it?" he inquired.

"I have just remembered an important engagement," said Sturgis, unruffled. "I fear, after all, that I shall be unable to visit your laboratory at present. I hope, however, that the pleasure is only postponed for a short time."

"I hope so," replied Murdock, calmly meeting his steady gaze.

All this had happened in the space of a few seconds. Meanwhile the knocking at the door was renewed. "Come in," said Murdock, moving toward his easy-chair.

The door opened and a servant appeared.

"Please, sir, Miss Agnes would like to know how her reserve has turned this afternoon?"

"Yes, Mary; tell Miss Agnes I shall be in all the rest of the afternoon, and that I shall be at her disposal at any time."

Sturgis, picking up his hat and coat, hurried from the house.

"Why did he want to shut me in the extension?" he asked himself over and over, and he could find no satisfactory answer to the question.

Then he took from his pocket the lines he had written on Murdock's typewriter and compared them carefully with those on the sheet which he had laboriously pieced together in the Knickerbocker bank on the previous day.

The result of the examination was apparently satisfactory; for, when Sturgis returned the papers to his pocket, his face wore an expression of calm but unmistakable triumph.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE UNDERGROUND PASSAGE.

As he reached the corner Sprague came upon Sprague, who was waiting for a car.

"Oh! I say, old man," exclaimed the artist, hardly able to conceal his elation. "I am glad to see you. I have news to tell you."

"So have I. But I am in a hurry now. Come along with me; we can exchange confidences on the way."

"Very well; whither are you bound?"

"I am on the track of big game. Can you spare a couple of hours? I think I can promise you an interesting afternoon."

"What is it? The Knickerbocker bank case?"

"Yes."

Sprague readily consented to accompany his friend.

"By the way," inquired Sturgis, "have you any weapons?"

"Any quantity of them among the properties of the studio," replied Sprague, surprised; "but I do not go about armed in broad daylight."

"You would better have a revolver," said the reporter. "You will probably have no occasion to use it," he added, in answer to his friend's glance, "but it is best to be on the safe side."

"Very well; I shall go home for one. Where am I to meet you?"

"At police headquarters in about

half an hour. Let me see: it is now nearly five o'clock. Say at half-past five. It will be necessary to obtain a couple of warrants and the help of the police before we start."

After Sprague had left him Sturgis approached Detective Conklin, who was still at his post.

"Did Chatham show up while I was in there?" he asked, indicating Murdock's house.

"No, sir."

"Did you notice the man with whom I went in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, let Chatham go for the present and stick close to that man if he stirs from the house. I shall be back in less than an hour."

"All right, sir."

When Sprague reached police headquarters he found the reporter ready to start with four detectives. He had not, therefore, any opportunity for conversation with his friend until the party reached its destination. There two of the detectives relieved the men previously on duty, while the others accompanied Sturgis and Sprague to the office of the Manhattan Chemical company.

It was after six o'clock. The place was closed for the night and seemed quite deserted. One of the men rang the bell. The tinkling echoes died away, but no sign of life manifested itself from within. Then he seized the pull and plied it again repeatedly and vigorously.

"That will do," observed Sturgis, presently; "the old woman is coming as fast as she can."

"What old woman?" asked the detective.

"I don't know. Perhaps I ought to have said an old woman. I hear her hobnobbing on the stairs."

The detective placed his ear to the keyhole. After listening attentively, he turned to the reporter with an incredulous smile.

"Well, Mr. Sturgis," said he, "if you can hear anything in there, your ears are sharper than mine. That's all I can say."

"She is on the second flight," replied the reporter, quietly. "Now she is in the second-story hall—and now you can surely hear her coming down the last flight."

By this time, sure enough, the sound of footsteps began to be audible to the other three men; and presently the door opened and disclosed the scared face of an old Irish woman.

"And what might yez be wantin', gintlemin, to be after scarin' an old woman most to death wid yer ringin'?" she asked, somewhat aggressively.

"We want to see Mr. Chatham," replied one of the detectives.

"Mister who, is it?"

"Thomas Chatham. Show me the way to his room. I'll go right up, and my friends will wait for me here."

"Mister Thomas Chatham, is it?" said the old woman; "well, yez've come to the wrong house to see him. I do be thinkin', for he don't live here."

"Come, that won't do," said the detective, sharply; "we belong to the police, and we saw Chatham enter this house."

At the mention of the police, the old hag's parchment face became a shade yellow and her eyes glistened.

"Sure, then, if he do be hidin' here, it's meelf as 'ud know it," she said, after a short interval; "but yez can find 'um, if yez like; yez can find 'um."

Whereupon she turned and hobbled off, leaving the intruders to their own resources.

They found themselves in a narrow hallway. On the right was a richly carved staircase leading to business offices in the upper part of the building; on the left, a door opening into the office of the Manhattan Chemical company, and at the end of the hall another door, marked:

PRIVATE OFFICE.
NO ADMITTANCE.

One of the detectives tried this door and found it locked. Whereupon he placed his shoulder to it and prepared to force it in.

"Wait a minute," said Sturgis; "let me see if I cannot open it."

The detective stepped aside with a quizzical expression upon his face.

"I guess you will find it pretty solid for your weight," said Sturgis.

The reporter took from his pocket a piece of bent wire, and, with a few dexterous turns of the wrist, he shot the bolt of the lock.

"You would make an expert cracksmen," said the detective. "I didn't know you possessed that accomplishment in addition to all your other ones."

The four men entered the private office. The room was quite dark, the shutters being closed and the blinds drawn. As their eyes became accustomed to the obscurity they were able to distinguish the outlines of a desk, a table, and a few chairs.

Sturgis went at once to a door in the corner. With the aid of his skeleton key he had soon thrown this open. After peering for an instant into the darkness, he took from his pocket a candle, which he lighted. Then, beckoning to his companions, he started cautiously to descend. The other men followed him and soon found themselves in the cellar, which they proceeded to search.

On the street side there was a recess extending for a few feet under the area in front of the house. The opening above was covered by an iron grating, over which was a wooden cover securely fastened on the inside by a chain and padlock. A number of carboys were carefully piled along the east wall to within a few feet from the rear of the building. Here, in the northeast corner, rose narrow shelving, on which were arranged a collection of bottles containing a varied as-

sortment of chemicals.

The detectives searched the cellar. "Our man is not here, at any rate," said the leader, when at last he had returned to the foot of the stairs; "perhaps he'll try to give us the slip by way of the roof. Come along, Jim; let's go upstairs now. Hello! what are you doing there, Mr. Sturgis? Think you'll find him in one of those bottles?"

The reporter appeared to be closely inspecting the chemicals on the narrow shelves.

"Who knows?" he replied, coolly, continuing his examination.

The detective bit his lip and looked the unpleasant things he thought it best not to say.

"Well, Jim and I will take a look upstairs while you are busy here."

And the two men went up the dark stairway, Sprague remaining behind with the reporter.

"None so blind as those that won't see," said the latter, sententiously.

At the same time he placed his hand upon one of the shelves and gave it a lateral push. It responded slightly, and the entire shelving, with the door which it concealed, opened outward.

"I thought so," continued the reporter; "this looks as if it might lead somewhere. Will you come, Sprague?"

"How did you find the combination so quickly?" asked the artist, preparing to follow his friend.

"It is not a combination—only a concealed bolt. Our friends of the detective force might have discovered it themselves if they had taken the trouble. The first thing I noticed was that a truck had recently been wheeled through the cellar in the direction of this door, from under the grating on the street side. And this truck was not here; neither was a large case which we know was delivered here today. The trail extended clear up to the wall below the shelving; and yet no truck, even unloaded, could pass below that lowest shelf. The conclusion was evident. I sounded the back of the shelving and found that it covered an opening of some kind. After that, all that remained was to notice that one of the shelves was slightly soiled in just one spot, as though by the repeated contact of a hand. From this, I argued that the bolt must be attached to this board. And it was. That is all."

As he spoke, the reporter entered a dark and narrow passage.

"Don't shut the door," said he to his companion, who followed him.

At that moment, however, the artist stumbled; and, instinctively holding out his hands to save himself from falling, he released his hold of the door, which closed with a slam.

"That is unfortunate," said Sturgis; "we may have to lose some time in learning how to work the bolt from this side. Hold on; it will be prudent to keep open a line of retreat, in case of unforeseen emergencies. Hello! we are in luck. Nothing concealed on this side; the bolt is plain sight; works easily. All's well. Then let us go on; unless I am greatly mistaken, we shall find another exit on the other side."

After following the underground passage for some distance the men climbed some steps and reached a square chamber, on one side of which rose a staircase leading to a door above. The room was unadorned by a skylight, which was wide open, admitting a draught of cold air from the outside.

Sturgis set down his lighted candle and proceeded to examine his surroundings. In the middle of the room stood a truck, upon which lay a long pine box. A table and a chair constituted the only furniture of the place.

At one side there was a long, low, leadlined tank, filled to the depth of about two feet with a dark viscous liquid. Near it lay a few empty carboys. In the floor there was what seemed to be a hot-air register, of large size and of peculiar construction. The walls were bare, unbroken, save by the projection of the mouthpiece of a speaking tube, and by a set of shelves filled with flasks, crucibles, alembics and the other paraphernalia of a chemist's laboratory.

After the reporter had finished reconnoitering he sat down upon the long box in deep thought. Sprague observed him with silent curiosity for awhile, and then, with growing impatience:

"I say, old man," he ventured at last to ask, "did you bring me here, armed to the teeth, to see you go off into a trance?"

Sturgis started like a man suddenly awakened from a deep sleep.

"Oh? What? Oh, yes—those confidences. Well, you start in with yours. I am trying to find the denouement of my story. I feel that it is just within my grasp; and yet I cannot seem to see it yet. But I can listen to you while I am thinking. Go on."

"I have not any story to tell," said Sprague, somewhat offended at his friend's apparent indifference to what he had to say.

CONTINUED

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